

# LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



## Mather Tower

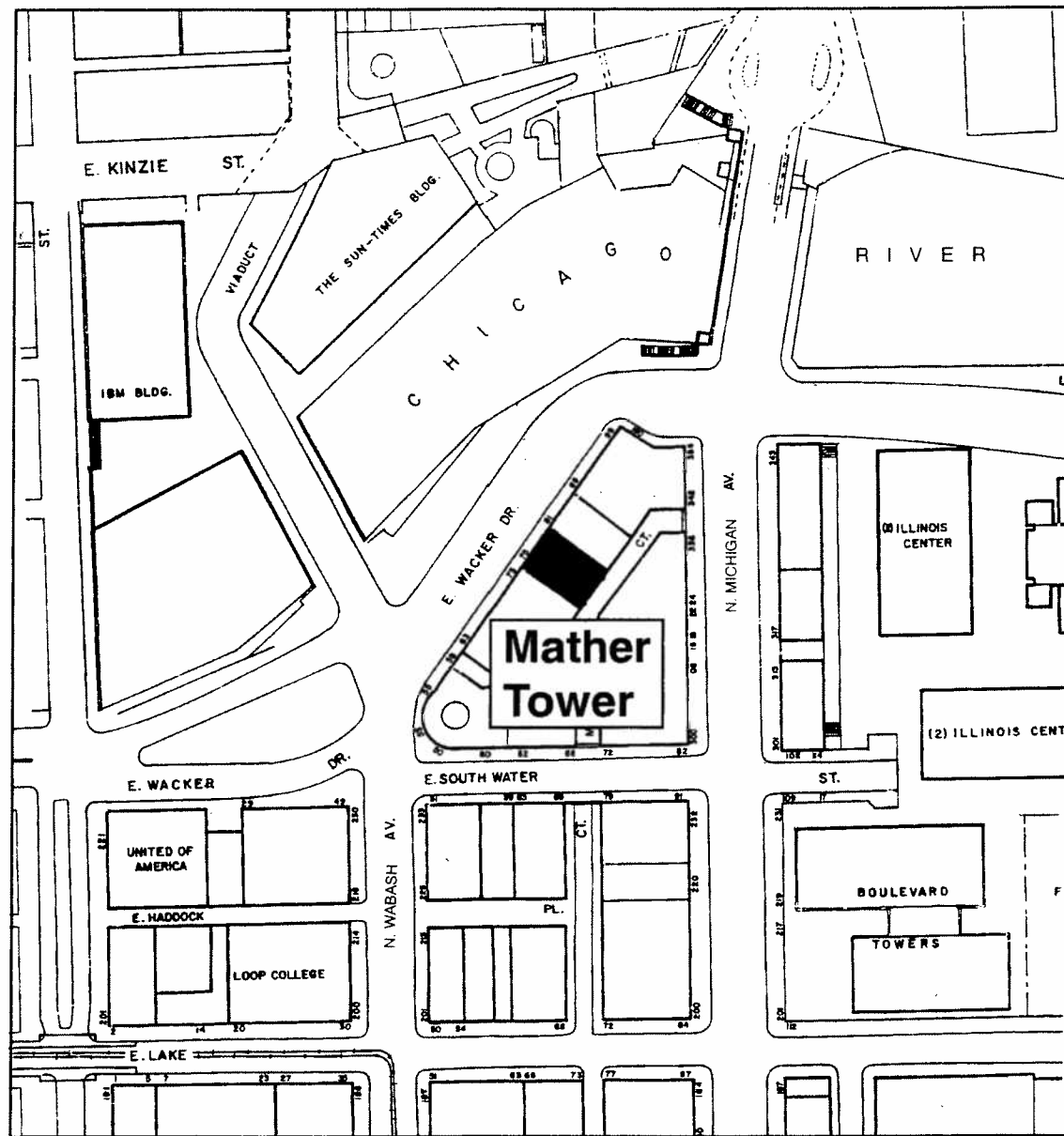
75 E. Wacker Dr.

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in December 2000



CITY OF CHICAGO  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development  
Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner



Above: Map showing location of Mather Tower, overlooking the Chicago River and within a half-block of the Michigan Avenue bridge.

Cover: Mather Tower, with its slender spire, rises higher than its neighboring buildings in this early 1930s photograph. At the time of the photograph, several three-story commercial buildings were on either side of Mather, remaining from the area's earlier incarnation as the city's wholesale market.

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks.*

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council following a detailed designation process. It begins with a staff report on the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark. The next step is a vote by the Landmarks Commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. Not only does this preliminary vote initiate the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until the final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.*

*Please note that this landmark designation report is subject to possible revision during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance recommended to the City Council should be regarded as final.*

## Mather Tower

75 East Wacker Drive

DATE: 1928

ARCHITECT: Herbert Hugh Riddle

Mather Tower is Chicago's most slender skyscraper, a Jazz Age silhouette against the city's skyline. Richly clad in stylized Gothic terra cotta, Mather is one of Chicago's best "Modernistic" skyscrapers, combining modern form with lush historic ornament both in its exterior and interior. It reflects Chicago's 1920's obsession with height, encouraged by the 1923 Chicago Zoning Ordinance which called for tall, slender, "setback" towers.

Mather Tower briefly was the city's tallest structure and forms a critical part of one of the city's most memorable building ensembles of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century skyscrapers located at the intersection of the Michigan Avenue bridge and Wacker Drive.

### HISTORY

Mather Tower was commissioned in 1926 as a speculative office building, envisioned by developer and businessman Alonzo C. Mather (1848-1930) to be part of a set of twin towers that would make a bold urban statement at the north "entrance" to the Loop. While its twin on Michigan Avenue was never built, Mather Tower became one of about two dozen Chicago skyscrapers of the era that were built partly as the result of the building boom fueled by post World War I expansion. Most of these had large amounts of speculative office space and were designed in accordance with the city's new zoning code enacted in 1923.

The 1923 zoning code governed the shape of Chicago's skyscrapers through the early 1930s, altering the skyline of the city. During that time, the total volume of office space more than doubled in Chicago. Under the code, a building could rise to 264 feet at the sidewalk, with habitable towers above that which occupied no more than 25% of the lot size, or one-sixth of the cubic area of the main building – a formula which encouraged skyscrapers with multiple set-backs. The builders of Mather Tower employed the formula in a way that created the tallest and thinnest possible structure on the available lot, thereby creating this "needle" skyscraper that was, upon its completion in 1928, the city's tallest building at 519 feet above the sidewalk. Rather than a series of small setbacks that retained more of the largest possible office floors, the creators of Mather Tower chose a design that placed dramatic emphasis on the tower itself, by extending it to the maximum possible height with many slightly telescoping spaces of small square footage.

Alonzo C. Mather, philanthropist and industrialist, is credited not only with

developing Mather Tower, but conceiving the original design of its octagonal tower. Born in New York in 1848, a descendant of famed Puritan ministers Increase and Cotton Mather, Alonzo came to Chicago at the age of 27. In 1881 he incorporated the Mather Stock Car Company to manufacture railroad livestock cars which he designed to provide for more humane shipment of animals. The company, which also went on to manufacture Mather's designs for improved refrigeration cars for the transport of meats, developed into one of the largest private railroad car companies in the country. He was also a well-known philanthropist in Chicago, funding the "Mather Addition" wing to the Art Institute in 1926.

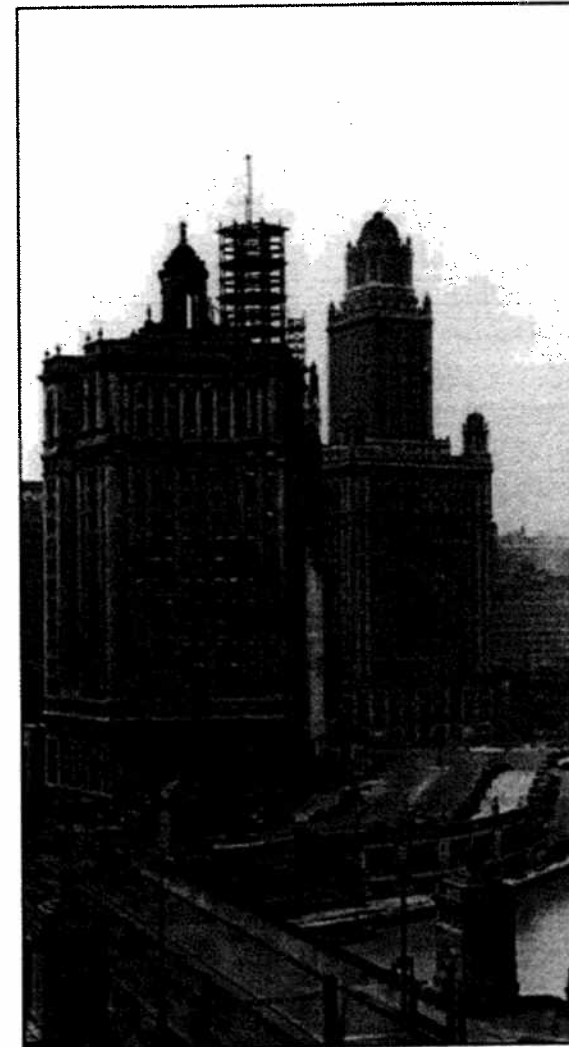
Upon its completion, Mather Tower was occupied primarily by advertising agencies, art studios, graphic arts designers, publishers, and several engineers and architects – companies that would have been drawn by the excellent light afforded to each of the small office spaces. Some of the early tenants included American Advertising and Research Corporation, Art Directors Service, Inc., the Bureau of Advertising, Business Service Studio Artists, Bowman Wesley Studio, T.A. Gannon advertising agency, Grauman-Jennings Studio, and Reliance Advertising Company.

## DESCRIPTION

Mather Tower is a 41-story building consisting of a 24-story base, approximately 65 feet by 100 feet in plan, surmounted by a telescoping 17-story octagonal tower originally capped by a 41 foot crown, which has since been removed. The plan of the building is offset to form a slight parallelogram, conforming to the site's lot lines which follow the curve of Wacker Drive as it hugs the edge of the Chicago River. The skyscraper, with its primary facade and tower clad in white terra cotta and detailed with Gothic ornament, rests on rock caissons and two basements. The base of the building has setbacks at the rear of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> stories. The tower, which is 42 feet in diameter at its base, reduces through a series of setbacks to about 10 feet at the top of the occupied stories.

The facade of the building is separated into several sections, with ornament concentrated at the lower six stories, at the 24<sup>th</sup> story where the main structure and the tower meet, and at the five setbacks and top of the tower "spire" itself. The three triple bays of the main facade are separated by continuous projecting piers and framed by solid corners with punched windows. The recessed spandrels between the vertical ribbons of windows offer flat surfaces for Gothic ornament, which further embellishes the building at every opportunity. The terra cotta ornament includes rope moldings, buttress forms, pendants, finials, and pinnacles, and flat bands of ornament featuring Gothic arches and quatrefoils.

The building entry, storefronts, and vestibule feature bronze frames with ornamental surrounds and grilled panels of Gothic arches and quatrefoils trimmed with finial cresting. The outer vestibule, with a vaulted ceiling and terrazzo floor, is lined with retail storefronts of decorative bronze set on white granite. The recessed storefront entry doors have bronze foliate surrounds and decorative grilled transoms. Above the inner doors is a solid bronze transom of Gothic design.



Mather Tower was developed by Alonzo C. Mather (above right). The building's steel frame can be seen in a 1927 photo (above), rising between the London Guarantee and Jeweler's buildings. A 1936 business directory advertisement (right) was aimed at prospective tenants.

**Dowd Letter Shop**  
WESLEY BLDG. NORTH SECTION

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**MATHER TOWER**  
75 East Wacker Drive

Just west of Michigan Avenue, on the site of Old Fort Dearborn, fronting the Chicago River; directly opposite the Wesley Building and the Tribune Tower.


Because of historic association, together with its beauty of Gothic architecture—designed in conjunction with the Chicago Plan Commission as a representation of the future beauty of Chicago—the Mather Tower is said to be the most photographed office building in the United States.

Whole floor areas range from 685 to 1295 square feet and are designed to allow one or two tenants exclusive use of each floor. The lobby between the elevators makes a convenient reception room for tenants with whole floors.

The building, with its observation tower on the 41st floor, stands apart from neighboring structures and offers to its tenants quiet, pleasant and efficient offices. There is a large proportion of window space in the Mather Tower Building approximately 15 feet from the windows.

Located one-half block from the Michigan Avenue Bridge, all facilities of transportation are readily available, and a parking area immediately adjoins the building.

Management  
**SUDLER and COMPANY**  
75 East Wacker Drive  
ET Ans 6622



The two-part lobby with its ornate elevator foyer and a grand stairhall is wrapped in Carrara marble with bronze trim and features ornamental details of Classical and Art Deco influences, in contrast to the Gothic design of the vestibule and exterior. The squared pilasters of the elevator lobby frame each set of the bronze elevator doors before continuing up to the coffered ceiling, where they are accentuated with molding and dentils. In the stairhall, ornate brackets support the wide cornice molding at each corner. Opening off the lobby, the white marble grand staircase rises to the second floor from a round newel post topped by a globular finial. The newel post and balustrade are ornamented with bronze straps and grillwork panels of Celtic knot geometric designs.

Mather Tower has been recognized in numerous publications for its architectural distinction. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a structure of primary significance within the Michigan Wacker Historic District, designated in 1978. It was recognized as a significant structure in the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey* of 1997. It was described in the *AIA Guide to Chicago* as "Chicago's slenderest skyscraper," and was included in *The Sky's the Limit*, a history of Chicago's skyscrapers.

#### **CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION**

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to recommend landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

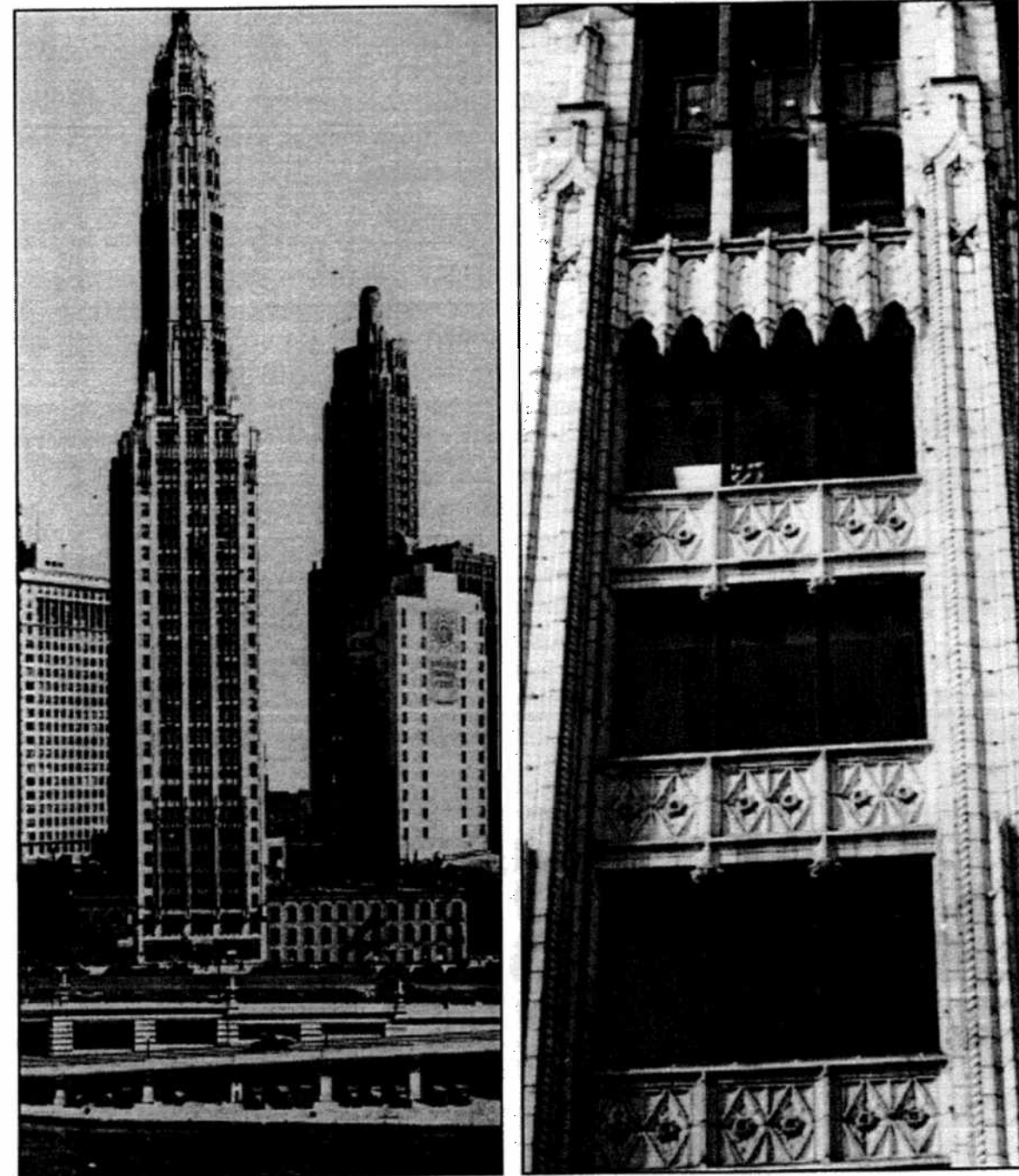
The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Mather Tower be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

#### ***Criterion 4: Important Architecture***

*Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.*

**Mather Tower, with its tall "spire-like" tower, provides one of the most dramatic examples of the influence of the 1923 Chicago Zoning Ordinance on the design of Chicago skyscrapers in the 1920's.**

Chicago during the late 1910's and early 1920's made important changes in zoning that affected skyscraper design. A 1920 revision of earlier height limits in Chicago allowed occupied floors only up to 260 feet, with unoccupied, ornamental towers rising to 400 feet. Buildings such as the Wrigley Building (1919-24, Graham, Anderson, Probst and White) and the London Guarantee Building (1923, Alfred S. Alschuler) were built during this time. Under a new 1923 zoning code precipitated by the post World War I building boom, a building could rise to 264 feet at the sidewalk, with occupied towers above that which totaled not more than 25% of the lot size, or one-sixth



**The setback-style Mather Tower (above, left) demonstrates the influence of the 1923 Chicago Zoning Ordinance, which allowed smaller floors above 264 feet. Gothic details (above, right), cast in terra cotta, ornament the building's facade and stress the building's**

of the cubic area of the main building. This code shaped Chicago's skyscrapers in the 1920's, encouraging the stepped back features. At 75 East Wacker, the developers of Mather Tower chose a design that maximized the height of the 519-foot tall structure with slightly telescoping spaces of relatively small square footage, emphasizing the tower rather than larger office spaces on fewer stories.

**Mather Tower is an excellent example of a 1920's "Modernistic" skyscraper, which combines a modern setback-style form with an exterior clad by more traditional, Gothic-style, terra cotta ornament.**

In overall form, Mather Tower is a modern skyscraper of the late 1920's with its elongated height, vertical emphasis, and setbacks. However, its exterior is accented with historic Gothic ornamentation rather than modern detailing such as Art Deco. This combination of modern form and historic decoration has become recognized as one of the types of "Modernistic" architecture.

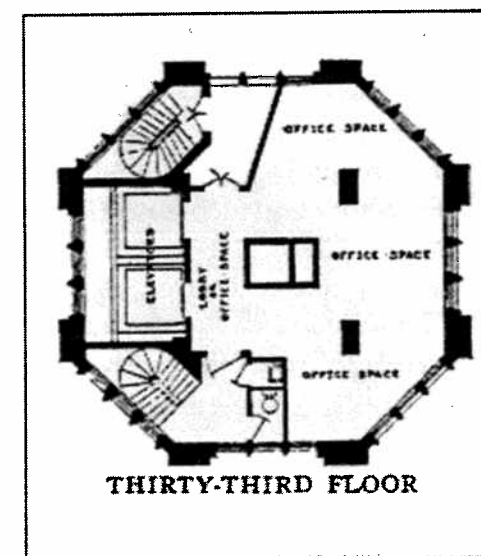
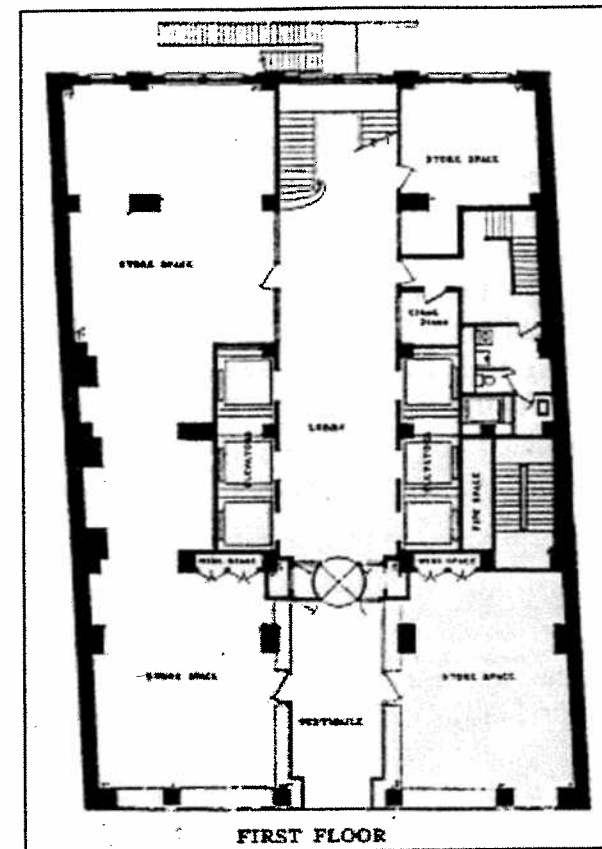
Gothic ornamentation and forms had been popular for American skyscrapers from the earliest years of the building type. Both the Reliance (1891-95) and Fisher (1896) buildings, by D.H. Burnham & Company, are clad with Gothic-detailed terra cotta. In New York, the Woolworth Building (1910, Cass Gilbert) was known as the "Cathedral of Commerce" for its Gothic-inspired spire.

In the 1920's, the Tribune Tower (1922-25, Hood and Howells), the result of an international competition, became an instant Chicago "landmark" with its elaborate Gothic top. Although it came in second in the Tribune Tower competition, Eliel Saarinen's entry was even more influential in its mix of setbacks, verticality, and Gothic ornament, a combination that seemed made for skyscrapers. A contemporary description of Saarinen's design, referring to its "unrelieved verticality and free Gothic detail," could also describe Mather Tower.

Mather Tower's use of Gothic ornament emphasizes its verticality. At the ground floor, the flat surfaces are covered with designs of Gothic arches, quatrefoils, and foliage. Buttresses visually strengthen the corners of the lower stories and the continuous projecting piers of the building shaft further appear as buttresses, topped by pinnacles at the base of the spire. At the lower stories, the molding applied to the piers form ribs similar to those found on Gothic columns. Rows of pendants adorning the second and the sixth stories appear as stylized gargoyles. The spandrels offer flat surfaces for the application of Gothic arch and rosette designs. At the base of the spire and at each of its setbacks, ornamental finials strengthen the association.

**Mather Tower exhibits a high degree of quality in its detail and use of materials, which exemplifies early 20<sup>th</sup> - Century technology, craftsmanship, and the artistic ideals of the Gothic Revival and Modernistic movements.**

The Mather Tower's carefully considered design, construction technology, materials and details exemplify the trend for skyscrapers of the 1920's to combine the best of art and technology. While the exterior is rendered in white terra cotta sheathing to resemble stone, it exhibits a complex array of effects in the details which use stylized



The building's first floor plan (top, left) is slightly canted to conform to the building's irregular shaped site facing the Chicago River, while the hexagonal plan (above, left) of the upper floors provided small offices for artists and architects. The lobby and main stairway feature Classical-style detailing (above and top, right).

Gothic designs to express a modernistic vision. This same blending of ideas is seen in the bronze storefronts and entries, which exhibit a high degree of craftsmanship and artistic inspiration. The high artistry in terra cotta and bronze, together with the geometric and carved marble and plasterwork of the lobby combine to display an artistic whole that represents the best of early twentieth century design.

In addition to these artistic qualities, the extreme verticality of Mather Tower in relation to the size of the lot creates pleasant visual arrangement. However, it also presented a number of technical challenges that were met in creative ways. There were complex framing problems and issues related to wind shear, which were discussed in the November 24, 1917 issue of *Engineering News-Record*: "...a definite uplift may be developed by certain wind conditions. For this reason, there is introduced the unusual feature of anchoring the four corner columns deeply into the piers." Additional wind bracing was "applied at connections to both the interior and exterior columns."

**Mather Tower is considered to be the finest example of the work of Chicago architect Herbert Hugh Riddle.**

During more than 30 years in business, Hubert Hugh Riddle (1875-1939), working alone and as a partner in the firm of Riddle & Riddle, planned and executed many important commissions including innovative residential, religious, and institutional structures, many of Gothic inspiration. Born in Chicago, Riddle studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Upon his return to Chicago, he practiced on his own for a few years, designing numerous residential buildings in Hyde Park, including a group of Classical Revival houses dating from 1897 in the 5700 and 5800 blocks of South Blackstone Avenue, which are extant.

In 1905 Riddle established the office of Riddle and Riddle with his brother Lewis. Many of the most important commissions of the firm were religious in nature— an influence perhaps seen in the Gothic detailing and proportion of the exceptionally tall "spire" of Mather Tower. Among the firm's notable religious designs are the Plymouth Congregational Church (1915) and St. Elizabeth's rectory (1916), both in Glencoe, and the Chicago Theological Seminary at the University of Chicago (1926-28) – a Gothic complex that includes the beautifully detailed Hilton Memorial Chapel. The brothers also designed a Gothic Revival school in 1925 at 5757 South University Avenue. Mather Tower was Riddle's last major commission in a career that was most likely cut short by the stock market crash of 1929. He died ten years later.

#### ***Criterion 7: Distinctive Visual Feature***

*Its unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City of Chicago.*

**Mather Tower is a critical part of the distinguished urban ensemble of early 20<sup>th</sup> - century skyscrapers focused around the Michigan Avenue Bridge.**



**Mather Tower's slender, spire-like tower is easily recognized in a ca. 1929 photograph (top middle), looking east along Wacker Drive and the Chicago River from Clark Street. Above: a recent view of the group of buildings surrounding Mather Tower near the Michigan Avenue Bridge.**

The conjunction of Wacker Drive, Michigan Avenue and the Chicago River, which forms an entrance to the Loop from Chicago's North Side, creates a unique urban space that is graced with a world-class collection of skyscrapers. This ensemble of significant skyscrapers is set within open space, rare within Chicago, created by a combination of natural and man-made factors. Often appreciated from the Michigan Avenue Bridge, they also can be viewed from the open river and the bridges to the west, and from the river and Lake Shore Drive on the east.

The unique space was facilitated by the 1909 *Plan of Chicago* which called for the widening of Michigan Avenue, the construction of the Michigan Avenue Bridge and the completion of Wacker Drive. In the decade after the Michigan Avenue Bridge was completed in 1920, the area around the bridge was developed with a collection of buildings that exemplify the best of the decade – from the white terra cotta historicism of the Wrigley Building (1919-24) to the Art Deco modernism of 333 North Michigan Avenue (1928). The Mather Tower's prominent location fronting on Wacker Drive, where it follows the bend of the river just west of Michigan Avenue, contributes to its strong presence as a critical feature of the ensemble.

**The distinctively vertical design of Mather Tower is an established visual feature of the City of Chicago**

One of the most dramatically vertical of the city's many important skyscrapers, Mather Tower has always been an impressive and well-loved feature of the skyline, with the advantages of site, height and light. Its verticality, Gothic design and white terra cotta cladding respond visually to the Tribune Tower and the Wrigley Building directly across the river, connecting it to the ensemble. However, when completed in 1928, Mather Tower rose taller than the others, with its crown as the tallest point in the city. While other nearby buildings display the base-with-ornamental-top or the block-like series of setbacks, Mather Tower's occupied spire distinguishes it from the group and renders it an easily identified building, made more so by its prominent site. The *Century of Progress Guide to Chicago*, written for visitors to the world's fair in 1933, referred to Mather Tower as "the needle skyscraper" and as the most photographed building in Chicago.

***Integrity Criterion***

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic, community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.*

A very high percentage of the distinguishing features of this tower remain, including its famous slender silhouette, white terra cotta sheathing and Gothic ornament. The bronze storefronts have retained their design and materials, despite many changes in retail use. The vestibule, which may have originally been open to the street, retains the detailed storefronts and the beautifully ornamented bronze inner entry doors.

On the interior, the grand staircase, which is said to have originally extended to the sixth floor, has been removed above the second floor. The building was renovated in 1983 by Harry Weese & Associates, which restored many of the interior materials and details. The office floors, however, have been remodeled over the years to accommodate different tenants.

On the exterior, the 35-foot tall crown atop the building, which was designed to surround the smokestack, was removed several years ago. In addition, some of the terra cotta cladding has required repair and replacement, with some of the decorative features having been temporarily removed for safety. As of this writing, the building is proposed for a rehabilitation during which the crown of the building will be replaced and the missing or deteriorated terra cotta pieces replaced.

**SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Mather Tower, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- all exterior building elevations, including rooflines.
- the first floor entrance vestibule and lobby of the building, including elevator doors and main stairway to second floor.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### Illustrations

*Architectural Forum*, July 1928: p. 7 (above and below left)

*Chicago Central Business and Office Building Directory*, 1936, p. 3 (below right)

Chicago Historical Society: cover, pp. 3, (left), 5 (left), 9 (above)

*Chicago and Its Makers*, p. 3 (above right)

Bob Thall for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks: page 9 (below)

Susan Baldwin: p. 5 (right), p. 7 (above and below right)

Tom Yanul: back cover

**Back Cover:** In this 1985 photograph, Mather Tower remains a prominent visual presence among the skyscrapers surrounding the Michigan Avenue bridge, including the London Guarantee (right foreground) and Wrigley buildings and the Tribune Tower (far right background).





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